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Brunello di Montalcino (Italy)



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Vineyards of the World

THE COUNTRYSIDE in this part of Tuscany is gently undulating to flat, and much more open than the hilly landscape of Chianti to the north. The dry, relatively treeless plains with their clay soils are mainly devoted to cereal cropping. Historically, grapevines were restricted to the less fertile, elevated land. The Brunello di Montalcino region is approximately 18 km by 18 km, and roughly square-shaped: its boundaries are the Ombrone River to the north and west, the Asso River to the east and the Orcia River to the south. The small hilltop town of Montalcino—its name is derived from 'mountain of holm-oaks'—is in the north east of the region, 34 km south east of Siena at an elevation of 600 m.

Until the 16th century, the only wine of note from the region was a sweet white from Moscato Bianco (syn. Muscat à Petit Grains Blanc). This wine style lives on today as DOC Moscadello di Montalcino. Although red wine production

became more important from that time, it was, like the rest of Tuscany, typically a blend of Sangiovese, Canaiolo, Trebbiano and Malvasia Bianca. The current wine style, Brunello di Montalcino, produced from 100% Sangiovese, dates from 1888.

Wines from this region were relatively unknown to the outside world before the 1960s. Most vineyards were very small, and the total vineyard area was less than 100 ha in 1960. However, by 1980, the planted area had grown to 626 ha, in parallel with the increasing international reputation of Brunello di Montalcino. Substantial investment in new vineyards, with large areas planted on non-traditional land, resulted in more than 3,000 ha by the start of this century¹.

The main variety is Sangiovese. Local lore has it that their particular 'clone' of Sangiovese (called *Brunello* = little brown one) is distinctive and superior to the other clones of Tuscany, or for that matter, the whole of Italy. However, recent research has shown that there are, in fact, many clones of Sangiovese in this region, as is the case for all regions of Italy². Recent decades have seen the introduction of Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Pinot Noir, Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc and Pinot Gris—these are confined almost exclusively to the new large estates such as Banfi, on the southern edge of the region.

Climatically, the Montalcino region is warmer, sunnier and drier than the Chianti region to the north. As a result,



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Sangiovese ripens more reliably here than in Chianti, and wines may often have 14% alcohol or more. In Montalcino, Sangiovese will even ripen on north-facing slopes—such sites are renowned as a source of the most delicate and perfumed wines. The MJT³ for Montalcino is 24.8°C (mean of several locations) compared to 23.1°C for Chianti². Similarly, the mean temperature of the ripening month is 20.4°C and 19.1°C respectively. For Montalcino, CTL³ is 18.5°C, BEDD³ are 1,633, SSH³ are 1,612, and growing season (April to October) rainfall is 425mm. Mount Amiata (elevation 1,700 m) to the south is said to intercept many of the potentially damaging summer storms. Montalcino, unlike Chianti, may benefit from cooling sea breezes in summer—the Tyrrhenian Sea is only 50 km to west. Curiously, despite the climatic differences, the average harvest date for Sangiovese for both Montalcino and Chianti is 2 October. This may be due to the local clones of Montalcino, which ripen later than those in Chianti.

The best sites for wine quality are said to be the mid to upper slopes at 400 to 500 m elevation, particularly where the soil is the friable, shaly clay known as *galestro*. Many of the newer vineyards have been established on lower, flatter sites (100 to 200 m elevation) on clay soils that had never been planted to vines in the past. The *Denominazione di Origine Controllata e Garantita* (DOCG) for Brunello di Montalcino has an upper limit of 600 m—in reality there is little suitable land above this elevation. There is a cluster of vineyards to the north and north east of the town of Montalcino at 300 to 500 m, and to the south at 500 m. For example, Castelgiocondo has vineyards

on slopes of south and south-westerly aspect at 350 to 400 m.

A typical modern vineyard has 2 m row × 1 m vine spacing, a VSP trellis system with fruiting wire at 70 cm, a pair of moveable foliage wires at 100 cm and a single fixed foliage wire at 125 cm. Unlike Chianti, where cane pruning is generally used for Sangiovese, cordon training and spur pruning are used here, with 5 × 1-2 node spurs per vine. Bunch thinning and leaf removal in the bunch zone are standard practices. Mechanical harvesting is restricted to the large estate vineyards. Budburst is in April, flowering in late May to early June and harvest in late September to mid October.

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¹ Johnson, H. and Robinson, J. (2001) The World Atlas of Wine. Mitchell Beazley

³ MJT = Mean July temperature, CTL = continentality, BEDD = biologically effective day degrees (April to Oct), SSH = sunshine hours (April to Oct)

² McKay, A.D., Crittenden, G.J. et al. (1999) Italian Winegrape Varieties in Australia – exploring the potential of Barbera, Nebbiolo, Sangiovese, Vernaccia di San Gimignano, Dolcetto and Arneis (Winetitles: Adelaide).